COMMON CULTURE

Symbolic work at play in the everyday cultures of the young

PAUL WILLIS
with Simon Jones, Joyce Canaan
and Geoff Hurd

OPEN UNIVERSITY PRESS
Milton Keynes

Open University Press
Celtic Court
22 Ballmoor
Buckingham
MK18 1XW

First Published 1990
Reprinted with corrections 1993

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Willis, Paul
Common culture: Symbolic work at play in the everyday cultures of the young.
1. Young persons culture
I. Title
306

ISBN 0-335-09432-5
ISBN 0-335-09431-7 (pbk.)

Typeset by Rowland Phototypesetting Limited
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk
Printed in Great Britain by
St Edmundsbury Press Limited
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

Contents

Chapters 3 and 4 were written by Simon Jones and edited by Paul Willis. Chapter 5 was written by Joyce Canaan, rewritten and edited by Paul Willis.

Notes

1 This section draws directly and continuously from Graham Murdock's original Gulbenkian submission (see Appendix). The ethnographic material is drawn from Joyce Canaan's Gulbenkian fieldwork. I welded together and added to the material in order to produce a continuous text – PW.
2 *Cultural Trends*, Issue I, Policy Studies Institute, 1989.
3 *Family Expenditure Survey*, HMSO, 1987.
4 CJMR *Annual Media Income and Spending Survey*, 1987.
5 Reported in D. Docherty, D. Morrison and M. Tracey, *The Last Picture Show*, British Film Institute, 1987.
6 Docherty *et al.*, op. cit.
7 Docherty *et al.*, op. cit.
8 This section benefited directly from Mica Nava's and Orson Nava's original Gulbenkian submission (see Appendix). The first four paragraphs draw directly on the submission. The submission was also received early enough (the only example of this) for Joyce Canaan to learn from whilst still in the field. This helped her to develop a specific line of questioning on advertising which provided the ethnographic material for this section. Mica Nava's and Orson Nava's submission has since been published in a slightly amended version as 'Discriminating or Duped? Young People as Consumers of Advertising/Art' in *Magazine of Cultural Studies* No 1, 1990.
9 This section utilises Janice Winship's original Gulbenkian submission (see Appendix) in the same way and in the same combinations as Graham Murdock's submission in the TV section.
10 *National Readership Survey*, July 1987 – June 1988, Joint Industry for National Readership Surveys (JICNARS).
11 See McRobbie, A. and Garber, J. (1975) 'Girls and subcultures: an exploration' in S. Hall and T. Jefferson (eds), *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Cultures in Post-war Britain*, Hutchinson, 1975.

—3—
Music and symbolic creativity

Popular music is a tremendously important site of common culture, for individual and collective symbolic work and creativity. The message of all youth research in the last thirty years has been that popular music is young people's central cultural interest. This blanket finding conceals many variations in what such interest means, for behind the category of 'youth' lies an enormous diversity of taste groups, subcultures and audiences, differentiated by class, race and gender.

What is clear, however, is that young people's musical activities, whatever their cultural background or social position, rest on a substantial and sophisticated body of knowledge about popular music. Most young people have a clear understanding of its different genres, and an ability to hear and place sounds in terms of their histories, influences and sources. Young musicians and audiences alike have no hesitation about making and justifying judgements of meaning and value.

Despite this, most official thinking and writing on popular music, particularly within the arts, is still informed by common sense notions of it as trivial and banal, as a simple-minded and uncultured activity that is commercially parasitic and artistically worthless. Beneath such notions are a number of deep-rooted assumptions about the arts which regard musical performance as creative, and consumption as passive. In most arts writing, this distinction between production and consumption, amateur and professional, is taken for granted as a matter of individual skill, talent and creativity.

Within popular music, and within young people's own musical practices, however, such distinctions are a good deal less clear cut. Symbolic creativity bridges them. The special relationship between production and consumption in popular music culture

means that most pop musicians begin as fans and create by copying sounds from records and cassettes: they become producers as consumers. Most musical activity, then, begins as and from consumption, from the process of listening to music. But consumption itself is creative. The cultural meaning of Bros or Morissey, house or hip-hop, Tiffany or Tracey Chapman, isn't simply the result of record-company sales campaigns, it depends too on consumer abilities to make value judgements, to talk knowledgeably and passionately about their genre tastes, to place music in their lives, to use commodities and symbols for their own imaginative purposes and to generate their own particular grounded aesthetics. These processes involve the exercise of critical, discriminating choices and uses which disrupt the taste categories and 'ideal' modes of consumption promoted by the leisure industry and break up its superimposed definitions of musical meaning.

To describe pop as passive is to ignore these vital cultural processes. For it is as important to understand how consumers' discriminating abilities are learnt and sustained as it is to discover why, in some circumstances, young pop fans become committed to performing for themselves. This chapter looks at young people's lived experience of music and their symbolic work in and on it. It looks at some of the common creative practices that young people engage in around popular music, at the grounded aesthetics from which music-making sometimes proceeds.

The chapter draws from interviews and discussions with a group of some twenty young people aged 18 to 26 in the Birmingham area, from the Wolverhampton ethnography, from prior ethnographic research into young people's use of music[1] and from selective examples drawn from music journals, and other Birmingham based informal publications. Where not otherwise indicated quotes in this chapter come from the Birmingham group.

The creative consumption of musical forms

Listening and buying

Many of the young people we interviewed frequently listen to the radio, particularly local radio and Radio 1 (still a staple of young people's listening). The purposes and uses of radio listening were multiple: to hear and tape new music, to listen to a specific show or an individual disc jockey (DJ), to use the radio for company during the night or day, or to structure and punctuate the daily routine of getting up, getting ready for work/college, working and relaxing.

Some young people use radio in the time-honoured way as an accompaniment to specific activities, such as domestic work in the home, using different programmes for different kinds of activities. In addition to local, commercial and national radio, pirate radio stations are also highly popular amongst young people, particularly young Afro-Caribbeans, but amongst large numbers of Asian and white youth as well. By catering directly for the musical tastes and enthusiasms of their listeners, pirate radio stations have provided a crucial broadcasting outlet for black music and an important space in which it can be transmitted and heard by young people. The massive popular support that now exists for some local pirate radio stations is indicative of the failure of local, commercial and BBC radio to meet the needs of large sections of young listeners.

For many young people the purchasing of records and tapes is an important sphere of cultural activity in itself, one that can range in intensity from casual browsing to earnest searching for particular records. It is a process that involves clear symbolic work: complex and careful exercises of choice from the point of initial listening to seeking out, handling and scrutinizing records.

With the prohibitive price of new records, and software such as compact discs (CDs), secondhand records have acquired an even greater importance for some young people. Some will spend hours browsing in secondhand record stores, looking for bargains and especially for oldies and revives. Indeed one of the prominent features of young people's current musical activities is their interest in old music, such as 1950s rock'n'roll, 1960s dance music, 1970s soul.

This interest in old music is partly a result of record-company strategies to make more revenue out of growing back catalogues, through rereleases, licensing songs for use in advertising, and releasing oldies and greatest hits compilations. But it also signals an enthusiastic interest in popular music from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s amongst a generation who never heard such music the first time round, and for whom it is in many senses new – and, for some, more authentic than current styles. The result is that large numbers of young people now do their own archaeologies of popular music history, carefully excavating the originals and tracing the genealogies of particular styles, whether from films, TV clips, magazines, or rereleased. In certain club-based dance cultures amongst the young, musical styles, such as those of 1970s soul and disco, have been excavated and reappropriated as dance music. Amongst some this extends into an avid collecting of old music, scouring secondhand shops for records that can be sold, swapped for

others, used for the purposes of 'mixing' live in clubs or for compiling personal tapes. There is a high exchange rate of records, both new and secondhand, between young people, with albums and singles being swapped and borrowed regularly. These are sure signs that the interest in 'vinyl', where it can be acquired cheaply, is still alive amongst some young people.

Home taping

The impoverishing effects of unemployment together with the declining economic importance of the traditional youth music market have resulted in something of a shift in consumption habits amongst the young. One of the most visible examples of that shift has been the massive growth in home taping. This is an important material dimension of symbolic work and creativity.

Home-taping of music is, in one sense, a strategy directly tailored to recession conditions. The tape cassette has proved to be a practical, flexible and cheap way of consuming and distributing music. With many young people unable to afford full-priced, new records, let alone CDs, on a regular basis, cassette tapes have become one of the principal currencies of consumption. Records are increasingly borrowed to be taped, with some young people collecting large stores of tapes, tapes not only of records, but also of live dances, gigs, parties and other musical events.

Taping music from the radio is now a widespread practice amongst the young. Young listeners select their favourite records from the weekly chart run-down and compile their own personal 'pick of the pops'. Alternatively, they tape new, unavailable, or expensive import records (particularly off pirate radio). By skilful manipulation of the pause button on a cassette recorder, and by means of deft cueing and rewinding, they can instantly edit out the spoken interruptions of the DJ, or jingles and commercials:

> JOHN: If I haven't got a record I'll tape it off the radio and, before the DJ starts talking, fade it down. Or new records that friends have got, I'll just tape.

With cheap, twin-deck cassette recorders now widely available, it is also possible to make duplicate copies of tapes themselves, and distribute them informally amongst friends for private consumption or, alternatively, to sell them.

For those who can't afford to buy records, or who don't want to bother with the problems of consumption and choice, home taping is an appropriate solution. This is especially so for young people

who own a portable cassette player/radio, but don't have the facilities to record records. Young people frequently rely on friends, with larger record collections to make tapes for them. There is something of an informal hierarchy of taste operating here, with the more committed and avid record collectors used as trusted and accepted consumer guides by some young people. Others request a particular form or style of music (slow-sentimental, uptempo-dance, roots-political) and let the tape compiler select the specific records. This process was amply demonstrated by Mary in Wolverhampton.

> If I want a tape done now, all I do is buy my tape and give it to someone else to tape it for me . . . and I say 'Will you do this for me', and they say 'What do you want', and you tell them what sort of record you want. If they've got it, they'll do it, or if they've got something else different you say, 'OK fair enough, do it for me' . . . They'll do it for you as long as you've got the tape, but if you haven't got the tape you say 'OK, here's the money, you get a tape and you do it for me, whatever change is left you can keep it.'

In this way, cassette tapes enable people to make their own personal soundtracks and compilations. Some young people extend this practice to experimenting with their own mastermixes of dance records according to their own grounded aesthetic – the aim being to mix several records together on a tape in a continuous flow, keeping, for instance the same beat, or to create interesting juxtapositions of different songs, rhythms and melodies.

In these more worked up practices, the tape and the turntable begin to assume the status of instruments in their own right. The hi-fi consumption hardware of the 1980s, such as portable cassette players, have also made the use of taped music (in public spaces especially) more flexible. The portable stereo cassette, in particular, has become something of a popular hi-fi for all. Relatively cheap and widely available through numerous retail outlets, it is truly the Dansette of the 1980s.

Given that cassette tapes occupy such a central position in the consumption and listening habits of young people, it is perhaps not surprising that some should be so resistant to the idea of bringing in a levy on blank tapes, or so contemptuous of arguments that 'home taping is killing music'. To many the economic and cultural logic of taping was plain and simple, and its illegality largely irrelevant. One young man felt that the idea of bringing in a levy to stop home taping was pathetic:

> They'll never stop it whatever they do. They put the price of records up, well they're a waste of money as they are. People are still going to buy tapes 'cause they're cheaper. If you can tape a record, why buy it?
>
> (*Ignition/Young at Art*, p. 16)

Interpreting sounds

Much of the existing research on popular music suggests that songs have their primary impact and appeal as vocal and instrumental sounds, rather than as explicitly verbal or lyrical statements.

This is not to suggest simply that the music is more important than the lyrics in young people's listening, or to place form over content. Rather, it is to suggest that songs bear meaning and allow symbolic work not just as speech acts, but also as structures of sound with unique rhythms, textures and forms. Thus, it is not always what is sung, but the *way* it is sung, within particular conventions or musical genres which gives a piece of music its communicative power and meaning. The sound of a voice and all the extra-linguistic devices used by singers, such as vocal inflections, nuances, hesitations, emphases or sighs, are just as important in conveying meaning as explicit statements, messages and stories.

Our discussions with young people suggest that the rhythms and sounds of popular music do indeed have a capacity to hold particular kinds of meaning and pleasure, and to evoke certain emotions within their listeners. Much popular music produces feelings and affective states, first and foremost, before it produces any specific attitudes or forms of social consciousness; feelings of happiness/sadness, romance, sexual feelings, or uplifting feelings. In this sense, the power of a particular song lies in its capacity to capture a particular mood or sentiment by a complex combination of different sounds and signifying elements. As one young man said, songs could, in this way, express intimate personal feelings and voice desires: 'Sometimes when I want to express something I can say to a person "Listen to this record – that's the way I'm feeling."' In this way songs can provide symbolic materials towards the formation and articulation of specific grounded aesthetics which are about and enable survival: contesting or expressing feelings of boredom, fear, powerlessness and frustration. They can be used as affective strategies to cope with, manage and make bearable the experiences of everyday life. Perhaps the most heightened example of this is the use of the personal stereo or Walkman, the ultimate artefact in providing a personal soundscape that can be carried around, quite literally, inside the head, while travelling, walking, waiting or

negotiating public spaces. One young informant, who at one stage was never to be seen without a Walkman, said that music was absolutely vital to surviving and getting through the day: 'You see this tape and earphones round my neck . . . you know . . . *Must* have music, man! . . . I'd die without music!'

Time and time again, young people pointed out that it was 'the beat' and the rhythm that they liked when accounting for their own musical tastes. These features were felt to be most prominent in black and black-influenced dance music, universally popular amongst black and white youth, male and female. House music was mentioned as being the most popular style of the moment (an uptempo and highly syncopated dance music with lots of overdubbed cross-rhythms, sampled voices and effects). One informant felt that in house music, as in much other dance music, the words weren't of any real significance. It was the 'feel' behind the music which was more important. For many young people, the syncopations and textures of dance music, through its complex polyrhythms and drum and bass patterns, has the ability to produce a grounded aesthetic of sensual pleasure and to literally move the body, both physically and emotionally. One young woman described reggae and soul as 'heart music':

> JUNE: It's heart music . . . music of the heart, it just gets you right there [lays her hand on her chest] . . . Reggae's like a heartbeat, it's the same kind of rhythm, there's something very crucial about rhythm . . . I'm not sure what it is.

In reggae, specifically, the physical power and prominence of the bass often held the greatest attraction. For some, it explained the overwhelming sensuality of reggae music. As Pete, another young reggae fan, put it: 'It gets you in the gut like . . . Most times I don't listen to the singing. The singing's going on and that, but I listen to the bass.' The effect of the bass and the rhythm, especially in the live context of consumption, often pre-empted the significance of any verbal meanings. These musical features are brought to life, experienced most intensely, and become part of a bodily grounded aesthetic on the dance floor. At parties, discos, dances and live concerts, whether pumped out of speakers through the hardware of a sound system, or transmitted to the crowd from a live band on stage, the music seems to be materialized at the site of the body, to be literally felt as much as heard.

Dance

Dancing is the principal way in which musical pleasures become realized in physical movement and bodily grounded aesthetics. The

sensual appeal of popular music is at its greatest in dance music, where its direct courting of sexuality generates a heightened sense of self and body. Experimentation with dance styles involves its own characteristic forms of cultural work and informal, learning processes. Patrick regularly practises and rehearses routines at home, dancing to records with his brother:

> You just stick a record on, and get into the groove kind of thing, like we'll work out some new moves over the weekend, and go up to the Powerhouse on a Monday and try them out like, you know . . . and sometimes you'll get a whole line of people doing it . . . It's really good.

Amongst white youth, many dance styles are initially appropriated and popularized from black youth culture. Imported from America, in the case of soul, funk and hip-hop, or Jamaica, in the case of reggae, they are taken up by young blacks and rapidly transmitted to young whites, who incorporate them into their own repertoires of cultural expression. John, for example, describes how he had picked up a reggae dance style known as 'skanking' (popular in the late 1970s) after seeing it practised by young blacks at a local youth club in South Birmingham:

> That fascinated me, and ever since then I've loved skanking. I picked up on it real fast and I'd practise the moves at home while I'm listening to my records, right. And we'd sort of mess around, me, my sister and my cousin . . . And they'd show me the dances they were learning.

Dance music enjoys mass popularity amongst young people, black and white, male and female alike. Out of the vast numbers of young people who participate in dancing regularly, whether in clubs, pub discos or house parties, there is a sizeable group of 'serious' dancers who concentrate on and even formalize a bodily grounded aesthetic of their own. For this group, the quality of a particular venue and its sound system, the individual DJ, and particularly the music policy, are extremely important. The emphasis is strictly on dancing, sometimes to the exclusion of drinking, or even courting. Young people, particularly the unemployed, will often go to a club with the price of admission, their nightbus fare home and perhaps enough money for one drink.

'All-dayers' are often a focal point for serious dancing and are something of a speciality in the North and the Midlands. Held in particular night clubs, often on a Sunday, they regularly draw crowds of around two thousand people who converge on the venue from as far afield as London and the South-east. These are dance

marathons which run for a mammoth nine or ten hours, and where a host of different DJs play a mixed diet of funk, soul, house music, hip-hop, Latin music and jazz.

There are also specific forms of dance culture amongst Asian youth, not only around funk and hip-hop music, but also around their fusion with traditional Indian dance and music forms such as Bhangra. This latter has become the site of massive popular participation amongst young Asian men and women at live concerts, discos and daytime events.

In recent years, there has been something of a diversification in music policy in some city-centre entertainment networks. In order to stay in business many clubs and discos have had to hire out their facilities to one-off 'specialist' agents, or open their doors to particular musical taste groups (punk/new wave, heavy metal, soul/funk, reggae) on particular nights of the week. One consequence of this change in policy is that club goers and DJs have been able to create their own musical and stylistic categories and admission policies.

The more serious young dancers invest considerable work and training in their dancing routines. Two young Afro-Caribbean dancers from Walsall, for example, spoke about how they had learnt to breakdance by practising to a drum machine at home in front of a mirror:

> A lot of us train before we come out of the house, don't we? I always do. If I know I'm on tonight I'm always stretching in the day. I always stretch every day, bend your back up and everything, handstand against the wall. You have to loosen your arms and loosen your body first and you've got to move your arms up and across sort of thing, and get it down your body.
>
> (*Ignition/Young at Art*, p. 14)

With their often elaborate and sophisticated moves, these more worked-up forms of popular dance have their own grounded aesthetic criteria for those that practise them, criteria of originality, wit and flexibility. Amongst some young dance crews (informal teams of dancers) their routines had become a kind of mime with clearly apparent narratives to them:

> There's a few teams, right, they're really breakers but they're mainly acting. They go on stage, they do a few dance moves but what they're actually doing is acting, there's a story behind it all. So they do a few moves and they leave the audience to fill in the rest.
>
> (*Ignition/Young At Art*, p. 14)

These young people were perfectly sure that what they were doing was worth something, culturally and aesthetically. To them it was an achievement to have reached a certain level of competence and skill in their dancing, a lasting achievement that would be remembered and even handed down to subsequent generations, rather than just a passing fad of youth. Accordingly, they felt that their dancing was just as legitimate, and deserving of the label art, as classical dance and ballet:

> It's a bit of an achievement. When I'm a certain age I can look back and say 'This is what I done' sort of thing to my son, you know. I've achieved something, teaching people. You can say when you're old, I've done all this lot and now it's your turn, so you live your life to a good potential, rather than going to the pub every day for twenty-five years or something . . . you've achieved something.
>
> Breaking's another form of dancing, like ballet is. You've got ballet and other types of dancing. Bodypopping is dancing, isn't it?
>
> (*Ignition/Young at Art*, p. 14)

Whereas dancing used to be seen as something of a feminine activity by some working-class young men, it has become more acceptable for males to express themselves through body movement. Some of the ties between dance forms and codes of masculinity/feminity have been loosened. They still remain however. A double cultural standard proscribes female participation in the more acrobatic, male-defined moves or links them unfavourably to masculine images.

For the young unemployed dancer there may be some connection here between the grounded aesthetic of power and bodily control exercised in dance and the predicament of worklessness. Besides being an alternative way of filling in time, 'working' and controlling the body might be some kind of consolation for the shrinking sense of power and control experienced elsewhere. Dancing, at this level, affords a sense of personal power, energy and control through bodily movement and the flaunting of a unique style which can provide some kind of displaced resolution to the powerlessness of the dole.

Interpreting songs and symbols

Many young people have a strong investment in the lyrical themes, imagery and symbolism of popular music. Some young people

acquire an intimate and considerable knowledge of the semantic complexities and nuances of song lyrics, a knowledge gleaned from close listening, perhaps in the privacy of a bedroom, and from the scrutiny of lyrics printed on album covers.

In many respects, popular music still chronicles the feelings and life experiences of large sections of young people, providing a medium through which an affective grounded aesthetic can be developed to enable personal and private feelings to be expressed and shared. Pop songs provide young listeners with a set of public discourses (about emotional or romantic relationships, for example) which both play back to people their own situations and experiences, and provide a means of interpreting those experiences. Young people use song narratives to make sense of their everyday conditions of existence, and particularly the experience of growing up. Many pop lyrics help in this by working on everyday, ordinary language, and giving it a special kind of resonance, power and poetry.

Popular music can be a conversational resource. The knowledge of lyrics, styles and genres is often used as the coins of exchange in casual talk. By listening to music together and using it as a background to their lives, by expressing affiliation to particular taste groups, popular music becomes one of the principal means by which young people define themselves.

It has now become a basic axiom of popular music studies that songs are open to multiple and diverse interpretations. The metaphors and narratives of some songs can have a certain looseness of meaning which enables different readings of lyrics to be made by listeners who are differently placed, socially, and in different contexts of consumption and who are developing their own specific grounded aesthetics. The appeal of any particular song might not depend on its literally making sense, but on its susceptibility to selective interpretation. Some young people may hear and use only certain fragments of lyrics, particular stanzas or lines which have some personal resonance, and which can be extrapolated from the general context of a song.

A lot depends, here, on the linguistic codes and terms of address used in songs. The pronouns of 'I', 'we', 'they' and 'you' used in lyrics, for example, can be made applicable to different situations and different senses of identity. This is one way that popular music forms and genres work to put together an audience, or a particular 'community', to construct a sense of 'us' and 'them'. But the preponderance of these terms of address in popular music allows listeners to impose their own identities on a song. You can read yourself into a song, and temporarily inhabit its identities and

discourses along the dynamic of a particular self-created grounded aesthetic. The sophisticated sound reproduction of the recorded voice and the conversational qualities of many popular music lyrics are further linguistic codes which can be inhabited by and so made highly personal to the listener. Songs are made somehow to really speak for the listener. As Paul, a dedicated fan of Bob Marley, points out, 'A lot of people relate to Bob Marley, and I can see why, you know, 'cause a lot of the things he sings about I've been through myself.'

Listening to music can also be an informal educative process, especially where songs deal with more explicitly political and social themes. Songs can be a source of political ideas and development when focused around particular issues, such as gender relations, war, apartheid, unemployment, nuclear weapons or ecological questions.

Many young people have a strong investment operating through a spiritual grounded aesthetic in songs which are seen to have a good meaning or a moral point to them, songs which dispense wisdom and good sense. In Jane's case, for example, referring to reggae in particular, she felt that music could be a source of spiritual nourishment:

> It's telling people something through music, through something that most people like and enjoy. It gives you a lot of wisdom. 'Cause in your heart, you know you feel that way, and when you listen to it you know that other people are thinking on them same kind of ways, and it kind of gives you more strength.

While many young people use music to situate themselves, historically and politically, through creative work with its symbolic forms and meanings, for young black people this process is especially important. Black youth have consistently found and made a political and cultural resonance in the themes and discourses of musical traditions which have their origins outside Britain, in Jamaican reggae and black American soul music, for example. What black musical forms like reggae and hip-hop make available are symbolic resources for the oppositional understanding and grounded aesthetic quickening of the otherwise wholly negative experiences of powerlessness and racial domination. Jamaican music supplies, for instance, the language and symbols of Rastafari, a whole range of anti-capitalist/racist themes, as well as a critique of the state. Black American music gives a language and imagery for the problems of urban living, of police harassment, for the problems of work, leisure, gender conflict and sexuality. The music of the

black church, for its part, has also increasingly provided a set of symbolic and historical meanings for many young blacks, and a spiritual language around which an interpretive community can be created.

The eighties has seen a veritable explosion in musical activity amongst young black Britons, with more and more black music produced and recorded in Britain. It has also seen the emergence of new, syncretic, black British musical forms. These are forms that have rearticulated Caribbean and black American styles, yet whose content and character is shaped in response to specifically British circumstances, and in line with the changing expressive needs of young black people and their grounded aesthetics.

Far from being an insular culture, existing on the fringes of white society, black musical traditions have also had an important interpretive resource for the symbolic work of other social groups. Asian youth, for example have found a relevance in soul, funk, disco and hip-hop music, music out of which new, distinctly British, Asian youth cultural forms are being evolved. White youth too continue to find in black music a language and set of symbols with which to express their own age, gender or class-based experiences. Thus some young whites relate strongly to reggae, soul, hip-hop and rap. One young white man applied the theme of 'sufferation' (oppression), used in many of Bob Marley's songs, to his own particular experience of school:

> I could relate very strongly to 'sufferation' and sufferers' music, even though I wasn't black . . . you know, 'Stop pushing me, Mr Boss Man', loads of songs . . . And the ones about freedom too. 'Cause I hated school, I felt I was captive by school, and by people in authority.

Popular music is always listened to within specific social settings and locations, and used as a background to any number of activities, from courting and sexual encounters, dancing in clubs, to surviving in work, or defeating boredom in the home. Music is also used to create and mark off physical and cultural space as young people's space, be it in the bedroom, the disco, the youth club, shopping precinct, street, park or concert hall. It is through these situated contexts of consumption that specific grounded aesthetics are given shape and activated and which in turn connect different sites and practices so that 'private' listening also benefits from the collective effervescence of the dance-floor.

Consumption into production

Sound systems

Most young people's musical activities are largely centred around recorded music. It is often the more avid young record collectors and taste leaders who provide the musical entertainment at young people's informal leisure institutions, be they parties or discos. This is a common way in which some young people become DJs, or start their own discos – a crucial and interesting point where grounded aesthetics begin to produce the more formal and public in a specific attempt to reflect or induce, promote or enable the grounded aesthetics of others or of collectiveness. A particularly heightened example of this public use of recorded music is the institution of the sound system amongst young Afro-Caribbeans, an institution where the activities of consumption merge into and become intertwined with more conventional forms of production.

Besides being one of the principal focal points of musical activity within the black community, the sound system also involves a number of primary private production processes, which embrace electronics, sound technology and carpentry. These informal processes are motivated by specifically musical enthusiasms and operate to their own cultural agenda. They often involve the use of independently gained technical knowledge and skills, picked up from electronics magazines.

In this process the mainstream domestic hi-fi equipment is raided for technical ideas which are then incorporated into the workings of the sound system. Commercially available sound equipment and technology are personalized and humanized; turntables and amplifiers, for example, are customized, while speaker boxes are designed and purpose built to house the large 18-in. bass speakers used by sound systems.

Sound systems not only provide a crucial promotional and broadcasting outlet for black music, particularly reggae, but also function as a key site of commercial self-activity amongst young black people. The larger and more successful sounds have a very real economic rationale, generating income from the sale of food and drink and from cover charges at dances and parties. Sound systems are one of the key institutions in an autonomous commercial infrastructure for the independent production, distribution and retail of black music. Many of these enterprises have been owned and run by black people themselves and sustained to a large degree through purchasing power within the black community. They form the lynchpin in what amounts to an alternative, local entertainment industry, comprised of recording studios, labels, night clubs,

sound systems/discos, record shops, boutiques and pirate radio stations.

As consumers and producers, black youth have suffered persistent discrimination from mainstream commercial leisure institutions which have actively excluded them or failed to cater for their musical tastes. The community's cultural and leisure activities have historically been the object of state harassment and suppression. Indeed, it is partly in response to such exclusion that the black community as a whole has been forced to build its own alternative leisure spaces out of a network of private houses, night clubs, and municipal buildings. The irony here perhaps is that young black people's musical activity is often the *result* of their powerlessness, their disenfranchisement and marginalization by the mainstream leisure industry. It is out of that predicament that young blacks, whether as consumers or musicians, carve collective space for themselves and develop an infrastructure of street-level economic enterprises and institutions.

Sound systems, then, are valuable cultural resources for the black community as a whole, and invested with considerable symbolic importance. As one sound system operator pointed out, they provide:

> Entertainment . . . Somewhere to go on a weekend, for us anyway – black people. We don't go to football matches, we don't go to the pub, so we go a dance . . . We play music to suit the occasion . . . Our aim is directly to play to entertain the crowd 'cause that's what we get pay for.
>
> (*Black Echoes*, 11 August 1984)

In some urban areas where young whites face the same lack of finances, transport and leisure options as their black peers, they can become alternative leisure institutions for white youth too. As one young white informant says:

> When you've been there a year on the dole, and all your friends are still there, everything starts to slot into place, you know what I mean? . . . Because if you're on the dole, you can't really afford to go the night clubs up town. And like goin' blues is one of the few things you can.

For other young whites, blues parties and sound-system dances were an alternative to mainstream and official provision for the young in the white community, whether in the form of youth clubs or commercial discos. The lack of dress restrictions, the hours of operation and the cultural practices of sound-system-based events were all seen as preferable to the more regulated and depersonalized

forms of leisure provided by mainstream commercial discos. For unemployed young whites as well as young blacks, the sound system could be one kind of solution to their exclusion from mainstream, and particularly city-centre leisure spaces.

Black music and oral poetry

The grounded aesthetics of a sound-system dance or a party divest records of their status as artistic statements with fixed meanings. New meanings are attached to them. Transmitted through the sound system and consumed by the audience at a distance from their initial context of production, they undergo a series of symbolic and material transformations. These include the creativity of the actual selection and ordering of music; the processing of the music itself by a whole battery of technological hardware, including equalizers, echo chambers, digital delay units, mixing desks and effects boxes; the use of records and turntables as percussive devices as in 'scratching' – thrusting a record back and forth while the needle is still in the groove; the cutting and mixing of fragments of different records into one another, using multiple turntables. These characteristic rituals of performance help to socialize the experience of dancing to recorded music, turning it into a creative performance and an event. Of all these practices, perhaps the most important are the improvised forms of oral poetry of DJ-ing, toasting and rapping.

In the live context it is the DJ or MC (mike chanter) who introduces the music, delivers improvised lyrics to the crowd and directs the dance as a whole with various interjections and exhortations. The grounded aesthetics here, or one of them, is to link words, poetic rhymes and statements together in time to the music's rhythms, and to improvise narratives of a topical nature.

DJ-ing is, in fact, a popular form of oral poetry which appropriates discourses and styles of commercially available reggae music but which also grows out of the everyday situations, their dramatic grounded aesthetics, their language and vocabulary. The art of the DJ is a more worked-up form of that language, with DJs delivering their narratives and observations in the popular vernacular of the street. DJ lyrics offer highly articulate commentaries on any number of social, economic and political issues and are increasingly addressed to the peculiarities of everyday life in Britain for young black people.

For all DJs, the live atmosphere of a dance is a crucial source of inspiration and symbolic creativity. Kojak and Flux, two DJs for a local Birmingham sound system, spoke of how they would absorb

the 'vibes' of a live event, drawing inspiration from the audience, from other DJs or from a particular record. As Flux explains:

> F: Well what usually happen is . . . the sound is playing, right, and you ketch a lickle vibes for y'self, you know . . . or someone crack a joke . . . You know what I mean?
>
> K: Like, most people, right, they would work off a record as well. You know, certain record can give you that little vibes, too, you know, and you can just work 'pon it.

Forms of symbolic work in DJ-ing differ. Kojak describes himself as a 'head top' DJ, because he tends to improvise lyrics straight off the top of his head in a dance or blues and set a mood with a certain style and humour, rather than 'chatting' in a more self-conscious and structured way with lyrics about a specific subject. Flux, alternatively, used a more structured set of lyrics and verbal routines which he wrote down and carefully rehearsed. Flux, like many DJs, writes down his lyrics in a diary that he carries with him every day, making entries as ideas come to him. Flux describes how he would improvise around a given topic, trying to match up rhyming couplets:

> Me start off with a description of everything me could think about this certain thing. Like say you're talking 'bout a car . . . you talk 'bout what mek up de car, which factory de car come from, how much nut and bolt it have . . . this and that, and then you try to make it all fit, you know what I mean.

A similar creative adaptation of black American musical styles, images and oral forms has occurred since 1984 in the area of hip-hop and rap. While British rap was initially imitative of American genres, it has developed into a distinctly black British form of oral poetry. Like reggae DJ-ing, such poetry and its grounded aesthetics emerge out of simple everyday observations couched in idioms and expressions that are drawn from American rap records, as well as from Black British English. As two young rappers from Wednesbury stated:

> T: We rap about ourselves, about the scene, what's going on.
>
> D: I rap about my mom's food, life at college and my mates and you know, girls, about the teachers . . . You know, things like that.
>
> T: Sex, money, drugs, robberies, things like that, things happening every day.
>
> D: You can say what comes in to your head really, but if you keep repeating everything they get boring.
>
> (*Ignition/Young at Art*, pp. 8–9)

Many rappers and DJs rehearse their lyrics by rapping to the rhythm of a drum machine, taping their voices and then going back over their lyrics, tightening and polishing them up. Since 1985/6 scores of British rap crews have emerged, using American idioms as a springboard for their own characteristic styles of delivery.

While rapping, like reggae DJ-ing, still remains something of a male-dominated practice, young women DJs and rap crews have nevertheless begun to emerge, drawing inspiration for their symbolic creativity from American female rap groups like Salt 'n' Pepa and bringing their own distinctively female style and humour to bear on the rapping tradition. As a member of the She Rockers, one of the most successful of recent British female rap crews, pointed out:

> Lyrically, no one can touch us, and that's kind of unusual for girls. Before Salt 'n' Pepa all the girls featured on rap records were very soft, like token females. We don't portray ourselves as hard, we just say what we have to say. We don't allow the fact that we're girls to stop us from doing anything . . . We promote women as decent, respectable people; not as objects of sex or ridicule; promoting women as just as good as any man.
>
> (*Soul Underground*, March 1988, p. 15)

While the boom in rap has opened some doors in the music industry to young black and white people, many practitioners remain highly protective of their skills, caught in the contradiction between wanting due reward for their achievements, yet wary of those achievements being robbed of their vitality and ripped out of their cultural context by the media.

In 1984/5, for example, the mainstream media latched on to hip-hop, with videos, advertisements, hoardings and radio jingles using hip-hop-style graphics, rap and breakdancing. It was a process not without some resistance, however, amongst some involved in the rap/hip-hop scene. One young female rapper had this to say about the hip-hop bandwagon in the media:

> I think they're spoiling it, really squeezing everything out of it. We're trying to keep away from all that. We've got our own nations and we're having our own thing. It's our world, our hip-hop world, and I'm not going to let them destroy it like they did everything else.
>
> (*City Limits*, 17–23 May 1985)

DIY recording and mixing

Since the early eighties, a number of developments at the bottom end of the domestic hi-fi and recording technology markets have

revolutionized the potentials for the symbolic creativity of young people in music and greatly increased the possibilities of music-making, particularly around the practices of mixing, sampling, bootlegging and home recording. These have emerged partly from the popular practices of home taping and recording mentioned above, and partly from the influences of black American dance music and hip-hop culture. They have enabled a process of the more formal reflection of grounded aesthetics in a 'bottom-end-up' process of promoting the grounded aesthetics of wider groups and collectivities.

With two turntables, a cassette recorder and skilful use of pause buttons, switches and faders, it is possible to mix tapes and create cut-ups for circulation amongst friends. In this process the hardware and software of *consumption* have become the instruments and the raw materials of a kind of cultural production. For many, this is for the simple reason that they are cheaper to buy, and easier to learn to play than expensive musical instruments.

Some of this home-made music never finds its way on to vinyl or into a formal stage show. It is distributed solely on tape and heard at mobile clubs, house parties and dances.

Mixing offers young people who can't play instruments a way of making music. Recorded music becomes the source material for the creation of a completely new piece which can claim its own validity. In this way, young DJs or mixers can become 'artists' in their own right, questioning conventional notions of musical skill and undermining some of the established rules of musical composition and authorship.

This kind of bootleg mixing has been considerably aided by the introduction of sampling devices which enable sounds to be collected from a variety of sources, whether records, TV programmes or the radio, and then overdubbed on a custom-built dance rhythm obtained from a drum machine. The specific grounded aesthetic here, as one DJ pointed out, is increasingly one of 'technical skill and imagination on two turntables with any record, whether it's electro, classical, new wave, rock, whatever. It's the way you actually use it, and not the record itself that's important.' Sampling, as one young studio operator said in Birmingham was 'the only way to do it', when it came to recording and mixing:

> I pinch a lot of my material straight off other people's records . . . You know, whereas someone like Sly Dunbar [famous reggae session drummer] will have spent ten hours trying to get the right sound for his drum kit, it's pointless me spending that

same time to try and recreate that, when I can actually lift it straight off his record with a sampler.

With the falling costs of recording equipment like drum machines, sequencers, samplers and keyboards, it is now possible to make records of high quality entirely within one's front room.

DIY-recorded British soul, reggae and house music is now being produced out of a growing network of small studios which have sprung up in virtually every major urban area of Britain. In many such studios, few instruments are used at all. Rhythm tracks are created by selecting sounds from a bank of synthesizers, keyboards and drum machines, the operations of which are accessed and programmed through a computer. Paul, for example, has his own studio in Birmingham where he records local singers who simply 'voice over' rhythm tracks that he has made himself. For Paul, writing a dance song is more like a process of building, adding layer upon layer of different sounds, musical textures and rhythms:

> I start with a drum pattern, to give it the feel of it, and I play the chords to the drum pattern, so you can sing along, and get the rhythm kind of thing. Then I'll programme a bass line, which will interact with the drum pattern or the vocals . . . And once you've got the basic groove going, then you go into the finer details, sort of thing, sort of sparkly bits, just to make it work.

As record companies have begun to see its commercial potential, an increasing amount of this DIY dance music is being recorded and released, occasionally through the majors, but more often than not on small independent labels. Promoted and distributed outside mainstream music-industry channels, for example through pirate radio, specialist record shops or particular clubs and dances, such music has come to occupy an increasingly large part of young people's listening.

Music-making and performance[2]

There is now a long and well-established performing tradition of instrumental and vocal music-making amongst young people, practices which embody grounded aesthetics and reflect and promote their possibilities in others somehow sharing the same symbolic community. Recent studies suggest that, today, the practice of music-making amongst the young is as extensive as ever.[3] A 1980 survey of young music-makers in Liverpool, for example, noted that there were more than a thousand bands on Merseyside alone.

But how do young people become interested in music-making?

What kinds of cultural practices and informal arrangements do young musicians themselves evolve, and what aesthetic criteria do they use for critically judging what they do?

Young people's interest in music-making and performance invariably begins from their activities as consumers, fans and dancers, and from the grounded aesthetics and pleasures of listening to and liking particular styles of music. For example, Kevin's interest in music-making came about as an extension of listening to records, dancing in night clubs and being inspired by his favourite bands:

> I've always been interested in music. I've got loads of records, I always did buy music, and I used to dance a lot . . . That's got a lot to do with it you see . . . So the music was just an extension of that, 'cause I always wanted to know, you know, how they did it, or what they did to make people move sort of thing . . . So then I started experimenting, started doing things with music, just messing about . . .

Kevin subsequently bought a synthesizer and learnt to play it by trying to copy his favourite records:

> The funny thing about it, was the sounds that they were using were similar to the sounds I was getting on the machine. So I thought that's amazing! I can actually *do* it, you know. And once you can actually play along with the melody, and work it out, it's just so good, you know what I mean?

The sense of empowerment achieved by being able to play an instrument and reproduce the sounds of a favourite record is a common starting point for young musicians. To learn by copying and experimenting (the usual mode for young rock musicians) is necessarily to be inventive. Guitarists, drummers and keyboard players have to work out how to sound like their role models, usually with quite different (and much cheaper) sound equipment. This means developing manual and technical skills, a discriminating ear, and an *ad hoc* understanding of sound amplification. As Kevin points out:

> I was never taught or anything. Everything I do is by ear . . . it's all what I feel or what I've heard. I mean some people I know, they've been taught and all that, and they're really good sort of thing, but they can't improvise, they find it difficult to sort of, you know, do anything themselves, rather than sort of have a piece of music in front of them, and playing it.

While Kevin eventually went on to teach himself to read music, many young people learn to play musical instruments from DIY teach-yourself manuals, or from sheet music, both now stocked in considerable quantities by most high-street bookshops.

Amongst young rock musicians, there is usually a short gap between picking up an instrument and playing in a band, and the learning process is as much a result of practising, rehearsing and jamming together as it is of any prior, individual training and skill acquisition. Most rock bands compose their own music through informal musical procedures, procedures which bring into play grounded aesthetics to indicate what sounds good, and how to generate an effect. Because rock musicians don't read music, they have to learn to play together in endless collective experiments, through hours spent rehearsing together. In Kevin's band, for example, song-writing invariably evolved out of such improvised jamming sessions:

> Usually, we'd just jam, then if we'd get a really nice section, we'd sort of say 'Oh, that was good, let's try that again, we'll do that twice' and then we'd do that part, and cut other bits out, and try and string it together like. And as for words, and stuff like that, it wasn't sort of a session where everyone was sort of sat round, and sort of writ a song. It was more like 'Eh, try singing this, this sounds all right!' or 'Try this,' you know what I mean, so it was just done there and then sort of thing.

Though there's an obvious interest in trying to improve the performance as the vehicle, the impulse to embody grounded aesthetics more formally for public expression is driven by the aim to reflect and promote grounded aesthetics in a wider community – not by the attempt to produce perfect 'things'.

For virtually all young rock bands, live performance is the focal point of their work. As many young musicians explain, it is in performance that they experience the most intense feelings of achievement. To be on stage is to be the object of public attention, and to have the glamour of their chosen musical role confirmed. Kevin felt that each one of the gigs that they'd played live was a great occasion: 'It was all really good. 'Cause we was all young, and really into the idea of "the band", kind of thing, and everything was for "the band", and we were all together, like . . . we just had a really good time.'

The pleasures of playing music together, collectively, or just 'having a good time' are paramount for young musicians. Most repeatedly stress the comradeship of playing together in a band, the excitement of being on stage, of giving people pleasure and excitement, of getting some public recognition and using music as an outlet for creative energy and expertise.

> When I first started out, it was like, being, you know, with loads of your mates, making music and going and playing, in the hope that one day, something really good's gonna come out of it . . . You've always got that kind of . . . hope . . . of doing something really good, when you stand up and sing, on a big stage . . . It's sort of like that . . . We had really high hopes.

While almost all young rock musicians do fantasize about 'making it' nationally and dream about the selfish rewards and releases of power and money, and though many take the first steps to achieve this by making demo tapes for radio play and record company attention, the most immediate reasons bands keep going are local support and appreciation. Playing music, moreover, is only one role in a more elaborate set of tasks and relationships, involving a support network of helpers, entrepreneurs, promoters and publicists, drivers and carriers, collectors, fans and followers. A performing pop band depends on a lot of people undertaking different tasks, using their own organizational and entrepreneurial, as well as musical, skills.

Musical performance, then, in this wider sense, amounts to an important expression and celebration of sociability enabled through some shared sense of grounded aesthetics. It is inherently a collective activity. Musicians know that personal fulfilment depends on the ability to do things together, whether learning to listen, and adjust, to other players in the band, or evolving informal attempts at collective organization, decision-making and financial management. For example they club together to buy equipment or hold regular band meetings. In describing performance as their most satisfying musical experience, young musicians are describing a kind of collective experience which involves the audience too. When a rock show works, it is because, in speaking to the crowd, the musicians come to speak for them: the music both creates and articulates the very idea of a symbolically creative community.

For large numbers of unemployed young people, music-making may assume a special kind of importance in a context where the priorities are those of day-to-day economic survival, independence from state control and the use and meaning of leisure. For them, music-related activities can function as important sources of cultural self-sufficiency through which to negotiate the boredom of the dole and survive the disorientation of worklessness. Music-making enables some unemployed young to develop grounded aesthetics which provide a cultural and psychological defence

mechanism against the dispiriting effects of unemployment on their everyday lives.

Ironically, the dole, particularly since the punk era, has been one of the principal unofficial funders of musical activity amongst the young, by providing at least some space and financial security for young musicians. The shared predicament of unemployment continues to supply a common denominator of experience for many young bands, providing a focal point for shared musical enthusiasms, for symbolic creativity and, often, political values. In the West Midlands, for example, music-making has long been a site in which musicians from different communities and backgrounds have intermixed and exchanged traditions.

This chapter has illustrated how the usually separately understood processes of musical production and consumption are closely related. The distinctions between them are blurred in musical practice, particularly around new musical technologies of consumption and production, and new symbolic uses of commodities. Consumption is itself a kind of self-creation – of identities, of space, of cultural forms – with its own kinds of cultural empowerment.

These forms of creative consumption around popular music point to a continuum between the more worked-up forms of musical activity and the popular practices engaged in by the young. If it's more 'producers' we want, then instead of concentrating on identifying and promoting creative élites or potential élites, we should, instead, focus on a general lubrication of the connections between these everyday forms of musical and cultural activity and the more formally recognized practices, to make the passage from the role of 'consumer' to that of 'producer' easier.

But most crucially it is the symbolic creativity pervading *all* musical practices which we wish to emphasize. Grounded aesthetics developed here are essential to the ways in which young people make sense of the social world and their place within it. Music, in short, is not just something young people like and do. It is in many ways the model for their involvement in a common culture which provides the resources to see beyond the immediate requirements and contradictions of work, family and the dole. It is this widest symbolic creativity which should be recognized and promoted in the provision of the general conditions and spaces that can allow young people's musical practices to flourish – to create the supportive environmental, economic and social conditions which enable them to do better and more creatively what they do already.

Notes

1 Simon Jones, *Black Culture, White Youth*, Macmillan, 1988.
2 This section draws on Simon Frith's original Gulbenkian submission (see Appendix):– paragraph 4, p. 79; paragraph 4, p. 80; paragraphs 2 and 3, p. 81 and paragraph 4, p. 82 directly so.
3 See R. Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music Making in an English Town*, Cambridge University Press, 1989; S. Cohen, *Rock Culture in Liverpool*, Clarendon Press, 1991.